

David Maisel: Proving Ground
Collection CAE1802

Introduction/Abstract

Proving Ground is David Maisel's investigation through photographs and time-based media of Dugway Proving Ground, a classified site covering nearly 800,000 acres in a remote region of Utah's Great Salt Lake Desert. Materials include research materials, work prints, digital images, correspondence, and exhibition ephemera.

Biographical Note: David Maisel

David Maisel (b. 1961, New York) is an artist working in photography and video, and the recipient of a 2018 Guggenheim Fellowship in the Creative Arts. Among his chief concerns are the politics and aesthetics of radically human-altered environments, and how we perceive our place in time via investigations of cultural artifacts from both past and present. His work focuses on power and the production of space by examining landscapes and objects that are off-limits, quarantined, or hidden from view. Maisel received his BA from Princeton University, and his MFA from California College of the Arts, in addition to study at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design. He resides in San Francisco, CA. He is represented by Yancey Richardson Gallery, NY; Haines Gallery, San Francisco; Ellen Miller Gallery, Boston; and Ivorypress Gallery, Madrid. For over thirty years, Maisel has produced aerial photographs of compromised landscapes in a multi-chaptered series titled *Black Maps*, revealing the physical impact of activities such as mining, logging, urban sprawl, and military testing. Rather than create literal documents, the artist has exploited the slippage between the evidentiary and aesthetic functions of photography. The resulting images subvert cartographic mapping, instead occupying a zone both imaginative and descriptive, informed by the politics of land use. His current project, *Proving Ground*, utilizes photography and time-based media to investigate Dugway Proving Ground, a classified military installation in the Utah desert devoted to the development and testing of chemical and biological weapons and defense systems.

In projects such as *Library of Dust* and *History's Shadow*, Maisel investigates institutional archives, and shows the power of objects to convey meaning over time. *Library of Dust* depicts one hundred copper canisters from the Oregon State Hospital, each containing the cremated remains of a psychiatric patient unclaimed after death. The canisters have reacted with their ashen remains, causing mineral encrustations to bloom on their metallic surfaces. The project helped initiate a major architectural rehabilitation of the hospital, which dates from the 1880's. In *History's Shadow*, Maisel uses x-rays depicting sculpture, painting, and artifacts from antiquity as source material in the creation of new photographic artwork. Through the re-photography of these scientific records from the Getty Museum and the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, Maisel subjects these objects from antiquity to a process of transmutation, allowing them to become reanimated and renewed.

Maisel is the recipient of a 2018 Guggenheim Fellowship in the Creative Arts; a 2011 Investing in Artists Grant from the Center for Cultural Innovation; a 2008 Artist in Residence at the Headlands Center for the Arts; a 2007 Scholar in Residence at the Getty Research Institute; a 1990 Individual Artists Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts; and a 1984 Francis LeMoyné Page Award in the Visual Arts from Princeton University. Maisel was named to the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts 100 in 2015 and was a finalist for the 2008 Prix Pictet Award in Photography and the 2008 Herb Alpert Award in the Arts. Maisel has been a Trustee of the Headlands Center for the Arts since 2011 and serves on the California College of the Arts President's Alumni Council.

Scope and Content

An encounter with one of the most secretive of American military zones, *Proving Ground* is David Maisel's investigation through photographs and time-based media of Dugway Proving Ground, a classified site covering nearly 800,000 acres in a remote region of Utah's Great Salt Lake Desert. From its inception during World War II to the present day, Dugway's primary mission has been to develop and test chemical and biological weaponry and defense programs. After more than a decade of inquiry, Maisel was granted rare access to photograph the terrain, testing facilities, and other aspects of this deliberately obscured region of the American atlas.

Comprising aerial and on-site photographs made at Dugway, this body of work explores questions surrounding military power, national security, land use, and the limits of technology and human endeavor. Whether in the form of abstracted test-grids through which clouds of chlorine gas will drift, the nested circles of chemical-release platforms, or uncanny laboratories built for neutralizing biological threats and decontaminating battlefield toxins, the spaces of Dugway suggest an encounter with substances better left undisturbed, with dormant materials we shouldn't awaken.

Looking down from above reveals colossal weapons testing grids inscribed into the land, as though the line drawings of Agnes Martin or Sol Lewitt had been taken to a violent and poisonous extreme. Maisel subjects his aerial images of Dugway's test grids to an additional gridding process: a template is inscribed over the photograph, much as land is gridded for cartographic purposes. Two methods of rendering overlap, creating hybrid, fractured spaces.

Maisel's engagement with Dugway challenges the capacity of photography as visual evidence; his subjects resist easy interpretation, and thus multiply strands of meaning. *Proving Ground* is a critical response to the extraordinary formal and political aspects embedded at Dugway, in Maisel's words, a "hidden, walled-off, and secret site that offers the opportunity to reflect on who and what we are collectively, as a society."

Materials include research materials, work prints, digital images, correspondence, and exhibition ephemera.

This archive is currently in process.